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The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports

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The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports

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Introduction

When first assessing the relationship between Christianity and sport, one is confronted with a seemingly wide array of bewildering positions, reactions and theological reflections from church history. On one end of the spectrum, most notably with Tertullian, we are greeted with antipathy, if not bulimic rejection because of the perceived idolatrous connotations with the games. However, on the other end of the spectrum, with examples from the modern versions of Muscular Christianity, we witness an amalgamation, a *tertium quid*, what Frank Deford popularized as "Sportianity." That is, many of the sport ministries today perceive the sport discourse pregnant with multiple values, making sport ripe for instrumental use and acceptance. To the glory of God?

At least initially, the variegated Christian teachings on and responses to this relationship, which James Mathisen surveys selectively in chapter one, raise some important questions and problems which need to be addressed if Christians are serious about theologically engaging the phenomenon of sport. How are we to think Christianly about sport? Mathisen observes that "over time the church has gradually accepted more of the justification and practice of sport, albeit on largely pragmatic and functional terms." Mathisen concludes that a "folk theology" informs this response, which is bereft of any clearly articulated theology of sport. Hence, a sober judgment for why this kind of book is needed for Christians today. What difference might a developed theological method, one that dialogues with the different resources for doing theology, i.e., Scripture, Christian tradition,

personal experience and reason, have on reinforcing the many benefits that characterize sport and reforming the spiritual and ethical problems in sport? If this space of life is worthy of theological reflection, are there any theological tools and concepts that might make our entry into this stadium of ideas properly affirmative and redemptive? In chapter two of section one, Michael Wittmer examines five possible ways of engaging culture which were laid out originally by H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic book, *Christ and Culture*. By reviewing Niebuhr's five categories and how they pertain to the culture of sport, Wittmer reminds readers how different theological doctrines and presuppositions affect why and how we engage sport. Each method teaches us something about God, creation, humanity, sin, evil, Christ and redemption. However, Wittmer challenges us to consider and adopt Niebuhr's final model, "Christ the transformer of culture", as the theological paradigm for inhabiting this sphere of life. More precisely, he focuses on this model's fidelity to the biblical narrative—creation, fall and redemption—as a lens for biblical faith to analyze, critique and correct sport as a form of culture. These core dimensions unify the Christian story, as explained in chapter two and before each section. They serve as integral aspects and a chorus for the whole book, explicitly and implicitly developed and repeated depending on the chapter.

If the reader is trying to determine where to begin, we would suggest you read these opening two chapters first as a historical and theological compass, then jump to chapter twelve for a Pauline summary of some important focal images that deepen the organization and direction of the paradigm outlined in chapter two. This enables the reader to become ensconced in a very deliberate motif which landscapes the fields, courts and pools we play in and on. After this, either read straight through from chapter three or select different chapters by reading the sectional summaries, but not forgetting the ebb and flow of the ethical and practical implications belonging to the sport discourse.

This book began as a project that came from a modest gathering of academics, sport practitioners and sport ministers at a Think-Tank—*Lord of*

Sport: A Quest to Discover God's Wisdom for Sport—which took place in March of 2005 in Dayton, Ohio. Like any book project, we enlisted the help of others along the way to bring the book to fruition. From its inception, we desired a collaborative effort from the three groups present at the think tank so that a praxis-oriented theory would govern the feel and flow of the contents of the book. Of course, depending on the contributor, some chapters are more academic and theoretical while others intend to convey an admixture of application and experiential direction of Christian theology. In fact, each of the fifteen chapters fits under one of five distinct Christian theological disciplines, with some chapters overtly overlapping: 1) Biblical Theology (1, 4, 12); 2) Christian (Systematic) Theology (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15); 3) Ethics (5, 6, 9, 15); 4) Practical Ministry (10, 14); and 5) Church History (1, 13).

Consequently, we present the reader four sections to this book, which reflect the Christian theological disciplines, the creation-fall-redemption schema and the specialized knowledge and/or experience of the authors. For the discerning reader, these different aspects organize this collection, so as to continue a theological discussion aimed at shoring up gaps in Christian theological reflection on this slice of life. Thus, our treatment admits some of the difficulties and paradoxes of engaging sport. We do not offer a theological formula that purposes to solve all the problems in sport, but rather an intentional, creative and norm-governed exercise intended to develop deeper theological reflection and practice.

Section I, *A Brief History: Theological Paradigms*, provides a selected historical overview of how Christianity and its beliefs about sport have changed over time. It proposes a theological construct driven by the biblical narrative for interpreting what is attractive and ugly in the sport discourse. It highlights the often puzzling responses by Christians in sport and how important a theologically-based, prophetic witness is for these troubled times and the innumerable people who play, spectate, market, consume, and love sports.

Section II, *Embodied Contestants: Created for Play, Games and Sport*, addresses the perplexing fact that we are embodied people created by God to incarnate the good life in and through such lived experiences like sport, strenuously, enjoyably and sensually testing the depths of our humanity. Is competition intrinsically good or bad? Central to this section is an understanding of who we are in relation to God, and His intention for us in regard to sports.

Section III, *The 'Fall' and Sports: Ethical Problems, Perversions and Idolatries*, orients the reader to matters of morality, ethical problems, gender identity issues and spiritual problems that can undo both the moral worth of the contestants and the intrinsic good of the sport practices. Because "we are what we celebrate", then how we, as persons endowed with dignity, direct our attitudes, values and actions in sport is significant; how we direct athletic performance determines the ultimate concern and object of our worship. This section addresses some applied areas germane to the ethical challenges belonging to the practice of sport.

Section IV, *Redemption and Sports: Toward Responsible, Flourishing Sport Practices*, emphasizes the difference that the cosmic reach of the gospel should have on how coaches, athletes, parents, churches, and sport ministers play and practice sport. Redemption in Christ restores our relationship with God so that our practices, methods, relationships, and ministries are directed toward others' well-being and the good.

When these four sections are thoughtfully integrated and applied, we believe the reader connects head to heart and opens herself to experience or feels God's pleasure that is dramatized in sport. A pleasure that resonates with the freedom, wonder and joy that sport offers. Undoubtedly, this starts with a biblical perspective toward sport that allows for proper practices to be learned and habituated with others in communities on playgrounds, pitches, courts and fields.